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ABSTRACT

This paper posits that Americans have three frames of reference (individualism, diversity of origin, and pluralism) that impact values and actions. Individualism includes understanding relationships with others. The paper identifies and describes five different types of individualism in U.S. culture: (1) Protestant; (2) republican; (3) utilitarian; (4) expressive; and (5) economic. Diversity of origin is identified by horizontal diversity (race, ethnicity, and gender) and vertical diversity (socioeconomic status and educational levels occurring in all horizontal groups). Pluralism refers to the holding of two or more viewpoints simultaneously. Forms of pluralism include: (1) coexistence; (2) cooperation; (3) co-explorers; and (4) co-enjoyment. These forms of pluralism may be used in multicultural education programs to enable students to learn an ethics of caring and hope for the country's future. (EH)

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# THE AMERICAN DILEMMA: Individualism, Diversity, Pluralism, and American Society

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THE AMERICAN DILEMMA: Individualism, Diversity, Pluralism, and American Society


ABSTRACT

Americans have three frames of reference which impact our values and actions. The first, individualism, is complex because there are five different types of individualism in American culture: 1) Protestant; 2) Republican; 3) Utilitarian; 4) Expressive; and 5) Economic. Each of these contains variations on the issues of freedom, success, and justice.

Our second frame of reference is diversity of origin. Horizontal Diversity includes race, ethnicity, and gender. Vertical diversity includes socioeconomic status and educational level and occurs in all horizontal groups.

Our third frame of reference is our view of our American Society and our place in it at the national, state, and local levels and in regard to special interest groups. The inter-relationships of these frames of reference are complex but the concept of pluralism may provide some answers.

Pluralism refers to the holding of two or more viewpoints simultaneously. There are four forms of pluralism: 1) co-existence; 2) cooperation; 3) co-explorers; and 4) co-enjoyment. These may be used in multicultural education programs to enable students to learn an ethics of care. There is hope in the process for America's future.

THE AMERICAN DILEMMA: Individualism, Diversity, Pluralism, and American Society

In the Odyssey, the Greek hero Odysseus faced the challenge of steering his ship through the strait of Scilla (modern spelling), located between Italy and Sicily. On one side of the strait, the monster Scylla lay in wait for unwary sailors. On the other side, the whirlpool Charybdis endangered ships which came too close. The challenge we face in America is a similar one and it may be equally perilous. On one hand we must find a way to respect the rights, viewpoints, and values of both individuals and our many diverse groups without, as Power has expressed it, "dissolving into relativism" (1992: 13). On the other hand we must avoid attempts to ignore or discount our differences in what Nicgorski has referred to as a "melt down" (1992: 16) into a melting pot of uniformity and conformity. We need to find a way to embrace our differences and yet maintain cohesion as a society. We also need to find an amalgam to combine our diverse views without losing their separate qualities.

The fundamental issue is one of identity. Americans have three frames of reference by which we perceive

ourselves and define our identity: our view of ourselves as individuals, as members of diverse groups, and as citizens of the national society.

## INDIVIDUALISM

Our view of ourselves as individuals includes our understanding of our relationships with others. The political philosophy known as individualism has examined the relationship of individuals to each other and to their society. Individualism may be defined as personal independence of action, character, or interest. In ethics and politics it refers to an attitude favoring the liberty of the individual (Funk & Wagnalls, 1962: 1252). Implied in this definition is the notion that individual rights are primary. There is no implication of responsibilities to others. In American politics the concept of individualism has recently come under attack by the new conservative right, the radical left, and the liberal points of view (Sleeter, 1993). Interestingly all of these have weaknesses in logic which we shall review later in this paper. The concept of individualism in American culture is a complex matter because there are actually five different types of individualism. We turn now to a consideration of these varying perceptions and interpretations of just what individualism means. Each of these types contains within

it variations on the interpretation of freedom, success, and justice in American life.

Protestant individualism

Protestant individualism traces its roots in America from the Puritans who settled in New England. The beliefs in this form of individualism, which originated in Europe during the Protestant Reformation, included an emphasis on a personal and direct relationship with God, individual salvation through faith, and an emphasis on good works. In this view, individuals were seen as being responsible for their behavior and accountable for it directly to God. God's representatives on earth (or members of the clergy) were not viewed as being essential to this personal relationship with God. A focus on good works was taken directly from the Scriptures and success in this world became interpreted as a sign of being in favor with God. It is not uncommon for some Americans to suggest that those with economic hardships may not have tried hard enough or else they have done something wrong in order to find themselves in difficult circumstances, implying that they are out of favor with God. This focus on good works became incorporated into the Protestant work ethic which later appeared in utilitarian and economic individualism. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay

Colony, articulated the values of protestant individualism. He considered (moral) freedom as that which was honest and just; success as being related to ethics; and justice as a matter of moderation, involving a view for the needs of others (Bellah et al., 1985). While ethics have been ignored in some views of freedom, the centrality of ethics has re-emerged recently in discussions of what American society should be.

Republican individualism

Republican individualism in America derives from the political doctrine of natural rights as being prior to society. Thomas Jefferson expressed the values of this point of view in The Declaration of Independence with the belief that individuals' "inalienable rights" included life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the formulation of the American Republic, however, was also the notion that each person shared an equal responsibility to protect the rights of others. In Jefferson's view, freedom meant freedom from "arbitrary" government action but it also required education for participation in governmental processes; success within the society required active participation on the part of every citizen; and justice was seen as deriving from the legal system (Bellah et al., 1985). Thus the values of Republican individualism included

political, ethical, and economic concerns but in the eighteenth century this view did not extend to members of diverse racial groups or to women in its perception of the role of citizenship.

Utilitarian individualism

Utilitarian individualism emerged in America along with Republican individualism and the belief in "the pursuit of happiness." The ability of an individual to succeed through hard work and personal initiative lies at the heart of this view which also places a heavy emphasis on economic opportunity. Benjamin Franklin embraced the values of utilitarian individualism and, like Jefferson, envisioned a society which provided the opportunity for ordinary citizens to improve their situation and therefore their "happiness."

By the end of the eighteenth century, many Americans believed that general social good would result in a society which was open for individuals to pursue their own interests. We recognize this view in The American Creed which blends political freedom with a faith in a capitalistic economic system. According to this view, "the greatest good comes to the greatest number of people when persons pursue their individual economic self interests" (Garcia, 1991: 16). This belief lies at the heart of utilitarian individualism. Freedom is interpreted as the

right to pursue one's dreams; success is judged in economic terms; and justice is perceived as fair opportunity (Bellah et al., 1985). The hidden issue in this form of individualism is whether or not the conditions of equal opportunity and equity actually are available to all.

Expressive individualism

Expressive individualism was something of a reaction against the material values of utilitarianism. By the mid-nineteenth century men and women alike, including members of the clergy, writers, and social reformers began to react against the idea of a life dedicated primarily to material gains. In Leaves of Grass the poet Walt Whitman expressed the values of this new individualism which interpreted freedom as the right to express personal feelings and to explore one's own possibilities; success not in terms of material gain but rather as a refined intellectual and sensual life; and justice as non-interference by others (Bellah et al., 1985). The modern derivative of this view is the notion that everyone is free to "do their thing" so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others and success is a matter of individual interpretation.

Economic individualism

Economic individualism derived from the material focus

in utilitarian individualism. In spite of the values of expressive individualism, economic individualism influenced American thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this view, freedom implies individual rights to compete in a free market with as little regulation as possible; success is measured largely in economic terms; and justice is perceived as non-interference by government action. This viewpoint, interestingly, contains elements of the old Protestant view of success as reflecting good works and God's favor. Today, this view of individualism focuses on both individual participation and competition in a free market economy and on personal rights within the economy.

There are potential problems and benefits in the values of economic individualism. When individual rights to enter and compete in the market place are emphasized, in a corporate context this freedom brings with it possibilities for the exploitation of others. Furthermore, a new concept in economic individualism has emerged recently which is a re-definition of our personal rights as consumers in the American economy. Perceptions of equal rights in the market place are no longer limited to those expressed by Ben Franklin that the society should provide opportunities for personal economic advancement. Lears (1984) has described a shifting ethos from a work ethic involving saving, civic responsibility, and a morality of self-denial to a new set

of values focusing on apolitical passivity, leisure, compulsive spending, and the fulfillment of individual material desires. The concept of equal rights in the market place now includes the notion that people not only have the right to equal opportunity but also an equal right to consumer goods. The idea of the desirability of these goods is reinforced daily in media advertising.

Political views of individualism

The concept of individualism has recently been rejected by some advocates of multicultural education -- namely those with a point of view known as radical leftist, on the argument that social behavior is largely structured or determined by groups, rather than by individuals. A second reason for their rejection of individualism is that those supporting new right conservatism have championed individual rights, especially in economic affairs. A third political view, liberalism, agrees with the conservative focus on individual competition in a free market but also takes into account diverse groups claims of discrimination in a variety of situations (Sleeter, 1993). Ironically, these viewpoints share some similar weaknesses and limitations in their definitions of individualism.

The problems with the radical left point of view are that 1) it tends to oversimplify the variety of types of

individualism throughout American history; 2) it fails to recognize that individualism as a concept extends beyond economic issues; and 3) it overlooks the core value of individualism as reflected in popular culture including films and television. The problems with the new right conservatism are that 1) like the radical left, it tends to disregard the variety of types of individualism; 2) it focuses too heavily on personal economic rights; 3) it is inconsistent in its opposition to legislative regulation of personal behavior which it sometimes advocates and sometimes opposes, depending on the issues; and 4) it disregards legal, economic, and social inequities across diverse groups. The problems with the liberal viewpoint are that 1) it also overlooks the variety of types of individualism; and 2) it may be too optimistic in its belief that educational programs which focus on positive characteristics of diverse groups are sufficient to promote not only tolerance but also appreciation of others.

## DIVERSITY

Our second frame of reference for our identity is diversity of origin which is, perhaps, the most easily recognized. It includes race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. We all belong to several diverse groups simultaneously and many of our views and actions come

about as a result of these memberships. The fact that we can identify with more than one group, or shift out of one reference group and into another within the same moment, makes our behavior sometimes seem to be not only complex but also inconsistent. Horizontal Diversity includes race, ethnicity, and gender. Ethnicity refers to national (or tribal) origin and all racial groups in America contain ethnic variations within them. Among African Americans, most tribal origins have been lost among the descendants of former slaves but ethnic variation is identified among later immigrants of African origins. A student of mine, for example, is the daughter of an immigrant from Kenya, and she is proud of this national heritage. Horizontal socialization is the process by which children are instructed in the customs, traditions, and values of their particular group of origin. Vertical diversity refers to differences in socioeconomic status and educational level which occur in all horizontal groups. Age may be considered a form of vertical diversity, because the young generally have less power than older members of the society. Vertical socialization is the process by which children are taught about cultural expectations for behavior in reference to social class values and age.

Diversity has been the focus of most multicultural educational programs including cultural content, inter-group

relations, and classroom strategies. The problem with a focus primarily on diverse origins and frames of reference, however important, is that it tends to emphasize our differences and to overlook our similarities in common aspirations and experiences. Both perspectives are needed in multicultural education.

## AMERICAN SOCIETY

Our third frame of reference is our nation and our perceptions of our place in it. In a vague way, most people in the United States see themselves as "Americans" but are often unable to articulate what that means. The answer is often couched in terms of personal rights, economic opportunities, or patriotic cliches. Our national frame of reference must be based on perceptions which extend beyond these generalized and vague impressions to include the relationship of individuals and diverse groups to the political process. A consideration of our "rights" should also include our responsibilities to each other (Becker, 1955).

### Government and the People

The doctrine of natural rights as the philosophical foundation of our Republic was cited in the foregoing discussion of Republican individualism. Implied in this

concept of natural rights was also a notion of correlative responsibility, or an obligation to respect and protect the rights of others. Becker has stated:

> (There) is, to be sure, no Bill of Responsibilities in our (Federal and state) constitutions, but a careful reading of them will disclose the annoying fact (emphasis ours) that for every right to freedom that they confer they (also) impose, implicitly if not explicitly, a corresponding obligation or responsibility.
>
> (1955: 4)

Thus freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked together. In Becker's view we can preserve our rights and freedoms only by a "far more serious and intelligent attention to public affairs" (1955: 25). Sometimes Americans do not see their part in the political system. We talk about our freedom but tend to overlook our responsibilities. Without both faith and participation in the democratic process by its citizens, the cohesion of our society is in jeopardy. Thomas Jefferson realized this and believed that equality of educational opportunity was essential for ensuring an informed citizenry which would participate in the political process (Beck et al., 1968).

Today Thomas Jefferson is generally regarded as the statesman who first articulated the values of liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the relation of individuals to their government. At least some credit, however, should go to Thomas Paine for it was Paine who most aroused the American public's sentiment for independence from England. An immigrant from England, Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774. At that time, the city was filled with discussions of politics -- "in taverns and coffee houses, homes and workshops" (Foner, 1976: 71). Debate was heated between those in opposition to England and those who favored reconciliation, in spite of the military skirmishes between colonists and the English in New England and the South. In January 1776, six months before the Declaration of Independence, Paine published Common Sense in which he 1) denounced the legitimacy of the idea of a monarchy and the principle of hereditary rule; 2) considered and rejected prevailing popular arguments for reconciliation with England; and 3) urged the establishment of a republican form of government in America. This little pamphlet changed political debate in America by its argument in support of this form of government. Until its publication, republicanism had been basically a vague form of radical political thought, but Paine "literally transformed the political language . . . and made it a living political

issue and a Utopian ideal of government" (Foner, 1976:75).

Common Sense electrified the colonies. Its impact was nothing short of phenomenal. At a time when the average pamphlet was published in one or two editions, totalling a few thousand copies, this pamphlet had twenty-five editions eventually totalling 150,000 copies. Its success was partly due to the fact that it was written in plain language, clear and direct, without the stuffy and legalistic tone of most other pamphlets. It was read by all types of people including educated politicians, farmers, and tradesmen. It made "sense" to ordinary Americans and converted them not just to the idea of national independence but also to a republican government. The success of Common Sense was also due to three other factors. First, it fit with the experience of the colonists, especially in New England, where town meetings and elections had already set a precedent for more participatory and representative government. Second, it referred to the diverse origins of the colonists and denied the idea that England was the sole "parent" of America. Third, the time was right. Americans were ready for Paine's appeal to colonists' material interests and hopes for a new society with opportunities which were different from those in Europe (Foner, 1976).

From our point of view today, perhaps the most important lessons we can learn from Paine's little pamphlet

are first, that the average citizen could understand the nature of politics and processes of government (Foner, 1976) and, second, that average citizens do care about their government if they see hope in the process. In other words, what is required for a republican government is not only participation by its citizens but also a feeling that their participation matters. Without their participation and interest, power can indeed fall into the hands of self-serving officials, as Thomas Jefferson once feared (Pangle & Pangle, 1993).

Government and Diverse Groups

Thus far we have considered the relationship between our republican form of government and individuals, but we have yet to consider the place of diverse groups in relation to that government. It was James Madison who first addressed the issue of "factions" in American society. Madison viewed factions as "the great threat . . . to successful and popular government" (Nicgorski, 1992: 25). He believed that government should protect the liberty of all but at the same time balance or monitor the interests of diverse groups in order to prevent any one group from interfering with the liberty of others. As a federalist, he was concerned with the inter-relationship of the issues which concern us today -- namely personal liberty,

diversity, and national unity. His insight into the relationship between liberty and the interests of diverse groups was expressed in a powerful metaphor:

> Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment (sic) without which it instantly expires. But it could not be a less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to . . . life.
>
> (The Federalist Papers, Number 10)

Madison recognized the inevitability of different interest groups within a society, but he also realized the possibility that, if left unchecked, their diverse interests could fracture the society. He also recognized an economic basis for factionalism:

> (The) most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property.
>
> (The Federalist Papers, Number 10)

One might conclude from the above passages that Madison opposed the idea of factions in society. In fact, he believed that factions are inevitable in all societies and proposed a safeguard by suggesting that the effects of diverse self-interest might be limited by increasing the

factions and enlarging the territory. To him, increasing diversity decreased the possibility that an ill-intentioned or an unduly self-interested majority could dominate the other factions. Madison's fear was justified in light of the subsequent influence of powerful self-interest groups which have in fact curtailed not only the economic but also the political liberties of diverse groups in America. We might wonder what Madison's view of today's political lobbyists would be. We might also wonder to what extent diverse groups are willing to look beyond their own frustrations, needs, and goals (however legitimate) to consider those of other groups as well.

Government in Practice

Jefferson, Paine, Madison, and others realized that the relationship between individual citizens and the governing process such as that acted out in small New England town meetings was unworkable with large numbers of citizens. Simply put, America was too big for this direct participation. In establishing our Republic, they assumed that issues of interest and public concern would be made available and understood by every citizen. As idealistic as the concept of our Republic was, there were difficulties in achieving and maintaining the process which the Founding Fathers envisioned. Theoretically, our constitutional

representative government of elected officials meant that the will of the people would be transmitted to these officials. Wolff (1970) has pointed out that in fact, however, individuals' relation to their government became mediated through institutions which were more accessible. These institutions were state and local governments, political pressure groups, and diverse ethnic and religious voluntary associations.

State and local governments were supposed to be easier for Americans to relate to their local representatives than to officials in Washington, but as the population grew, it became increasingly difficult for individuals to be in direct contact with state officials as well, except for an occasional letter or telegram. And when we contact them do they really pay any attention? When I wrote a letter to my state representative, inquiring about the procedure to follow for my son to apply for a scholarship which required the support of a representative, I received a form letter back stating that he was glad to learn of my support of the program and that he supported it also -- period!

Ever since the eighteenth century, political pressure groups have proliferated to the degree that in our time professional lobbyists are paid by special groups, particularly with economic self interests, to make their concerns clear to elected officials at the national, state, and local levels.

Voluntary organizations are perhaps today the only arena directly available to people from diverse groups to make their values, needs, and frustrations heard. Often however, the voices of these groups are dismissed by those in political power as "not in the mainstream," "too radical," or simply "self interested." The question, of course, is 'How are they any more self-interested than the lobbies?' It is small wonder that some Americans give up on the political process and focus on attaining individual material pleasures while others believe that even if they do join together in organizations to make their concerns heard that they will probably not be taken seriously, short of massive demonstrations.

The problem of being heard is found not only at the national level, but in all of these mediating institutions as well. To what extent do our elected officials listen to a minority view, a lobbyist seriously consider the alternative point of view, or a voluntary group consider the concerns of other groups? These problems with the workability of our political process may seem overstated, but the inter-relationships are complex. As idealistic as our Republican form of government was, Madison was correct when he worried that it <u>is</u> subject to individual indifference and factional self-interest of different constituencies. Another perspective is needed, but it

requires work on a personal level. We turn now to a consideration of pluralism and to our personal inter-relationships in a multicultural society.

## PLURALISM

Recognizing the legitimacy as well as the limits of our individual rights and diverse claims does not necessarily give us guidelines for reconciling these points of view on a day-to-day basis. The concept of pluralism may provide some possibilities. Pluralism does not refer to diverse groups as is sometimes assumed. Pluralism may be defined as the holding of two or more viewpoints simultaneously. Within this framework, there is beginning to appear a point of view which is not based on abstract philosophical ideas about rights, social justice, and equity, however important they may be. Most of us do not come to care about each other through an abstract philosophical view of ethics. An ethics of care involves our emotions and how we feel about each other. Diller (1992) has considered four forms of pluralism which evolve out of this perspective. The first is a pluralism of co-existence, which basically combines tolerance with mutual respect for others. The second is a pluralism of cooperation which assumes that common interests require us to work together in order to accomplish goals which diverse groups could not achieve alone. The third is

a pluralism of co-explorers in which we become involved in a process of exploring who we are. This view recognizes and identifies us as individuals and not simply as members of diverse groups. The process here requires reciprocal effort in order to achieve reciprocity of understanding. The fourth form is a pluralism of co-enjoyment in which we share our joys. The idea is that we become more sensitive to each other by sharing our personal interests and pleasures.

> We have all had the experience of trying to make "make conversation" with someone who seems a mute dullard until we hit upon their area of real interest, and suddenly they transform themselves before our eyes into an animated, vital, even fascinating being.
>
> (Diller, 1992: 210)

There is a sequence in these pluralisms, whereby we move from simply tolerating each other, to working together, to understanding and appreciating each other, to finding pleasure in each others' company. In the past we have talked of tolerance, co-operation, and understanding, but mere tolerance and a focus on mutual goals do not necessarily lead to our caring about each other. In the past we have assumed that sharing our pain would enable us to care. Perhaps we have focused too much on our diverse

frustrations and sorrows. Perhaps we have overlooked the power of sharing our joys. In sharing our joys we may begin to take pleasure in each others' company and when we do that we begin to care. There is a risk, however, in sharing our joys because in the process we make ourselves vulnerable. We take the chance that others will not share our excitement or understand our enjoyment. We risk rejection or maybe even ridicule. Taking this risk has two conditions. We need to believe that the risk is worth it but who is going to do that first? You or me? We also need to care as much about what the other person is feeling as we care about our own feelings. In other words we need to want more than respectful co-existence and the achievement of common goals. We need to want to become <u>friends</u>. Perhaps our national issue of equity and our groups' difficulties in communicating with each other can begin to be solved at the individual level.

There are implications in the four forms of pluralism for multicultural education. We have heard a lot lately about co-operative learning and co-operative co-exploring. These are steps in the right direction but perhaps now we can move on to sharing our joys in the classroom. We cannot all run for public office, contact our elected officials with all of our concerns, hope to influence lobbyists, or even have time to join more than one or two volunteer

groups, but we can manage what we do in our classrooms. We can help our students from diverse backgrounds to become friends. Perhaps in so doing, we may discover who we are individually and collectively. There is hope in the process for all of us and for America's future.

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